

The "Metaphysica" Conceit

Only in this century has Donne regained the reputation for poetic brilliance that he possessed in his own time and for a generation after his death. Intellectual and aesthetic fashions changed following the Restoration, and Donne was relegated to the status of a footnote in literary history, being seen as witty but difficult, arrogant, and offensive. In *A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire*, John Dryden condemned Donne because "he affects the metaphysics . . . and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love."

Samuel Johnson amplified these criticisms, coining the phrase "Metaphysical Poets" for all those, such as Abraham Cowley, who shared Donne's perceived faults (see his life of Cowley, 1.2736). In such poetry, Johnson complained:

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. (1.2737)

This "yoking together" of images produces what are known as "conceits." Broadly speaking, conceits are comparisons — what distinguishes the metaphysical poets is a preference for comparisons between things which are as different as possible and (in T. S. Eliot's words) "the elaboration . . . of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it" (2.2402).

To choose a famous example, Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (1.1248–49) compares the souls of the two lovers to the two legs of a compass:

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.
(lines 25–36)

When the conceit is first introduced, the grounds of the comparison seem relatively restricted and straightforward. The lovers' souls are like the legs (or

feet) of a compass because, though distinct, they together form a single entity.

But Donne almost immediately expands the grounds of the comparison by introducing movement, which is the theme of the poem as a whole. In the second stanza above, he elaborates on the affinity between the two legs of the compass which is demonstrated by the fixed foot's sympathetic leaning after the moving one. This stanza concludes with an image suggesting the lover's reunion, as the moving foot returns to the center and both stand erect.

The third stanza seems to follow on in this train of thought, but in fact Donne has silently altered the terms of the comparison. Now he emphasizes the firmness, rather than the sympathetic leaning, of the fixed foot, which allows the moving foot to describe an exact circle around it.

The two final stanzas both conclude with an assurance of reunion after separation. In the first, Donne comes home; in the second he ends where he began. Yet when we consider how the compass works, we immediately see that these two elaborations of the conceit are mutually exclusive. In the first, the legs of the compass are parted and then joined again as the moving foot returns to the center; the suggestion is of physical reunion, with sexual implications. In the final stanza, on the other hand, the moving foot is always at an equal distance from the fixed foot. The union suggested here is perhaps more "metaphysical" than physical.

The brilliance of Donne's "conceited" verse lies partly in the intellectual rigor with which he pursues all the implications of a comparison, and partly in the elegance and agility with which he shifts from one comparison to another. To explore Donne's use of conceits further, read "A Valediction: Of Weeping" (1.1244). To what things are tears compared in the course of the poem? How does Donne introduce and elaborate the conceits, and how does one give way to the next?